by Ed Ives

Getting There Is Half The Problem

"Stepping from the busy maelstrom of the workaday to the natural quiet of mountain stream, range or marshland, is but a short drive over paved highways. Nature is literally brought to the sportsman's doorstep."

With these flowery words, the second biennial report of the Washington State Game Commission, issued in 1936, begins.

> . . . In only the more remote areas of the state is it necessary to use pack horse or pack board over long treks. With the opening of game country to the auto traveler has come a sharp gain in the number of license holders during the past few years . . .
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> Fast cars and better roads have given impetus to hunting and fishing by sportsman and layman. The public has been attracted to the sport by easy and convenient access to hunting and angling spots.

While nature is still brought to the "sportsman's doorstep" by paved highways, energy-conscious travelers today may be a little reluctant to jump in the car and head for the more remote hunting or fishing areas. In fact, just as the "opening of game country to the auto traveler" led to a spurt in hunting and fishing license sales, the rise in the price of gasoline has apparently resulted in a slowdown in license sales in recent years.

There's no doubt that transportation is an important and expensive consideration for both hunters and anglers. In fact, for all wildlife enthusiasts, getting to and from that wildlife experience plays a big part in determining the "quality" of the recreation enjoyed and its cost.

In that Game Department report of nearly half a century ago, it's difficult to find any hint of the adverse effects of the "easy and convenient access" the writer trumpeted. We view the whole scene a little more critically today and wildlife managers are arguing for shutting off some of that easy access.

One thing is sure about the "good old days": It was a lot less crowded out there. Today, there are more anglers, hunters, birdwatchers, backpackers, swimmers, skiers, picnickers and litterbugs than ever before. Some categories may go up or down each year, but the total just keeps growing. And so does the pressure on wildlife. Part of the reason the pressure keeps increasing is the folks who comprise this crowd of outdoor buffs are better-equipped and better-transported every year. They're finding it easier to do more over a larger area for a longer time, and generally, if they can afford it, they're doing it.

The father of modern game management, Aldo Leopold, recognized the problem and wrote about it back in 1949:

> It is the expansion of transport without a corresponding growth of perception that threatens us with qualitative bankruptcy of the recreational process. Recreational development is a job not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely reaches of the human mind.

Nevertheless, the "expansion of transport" continues to take place and there isn't any end in sight. Hunting has probably been affected more by the new technology of transport than other outdoor sports, not only because of new ways of getting to and from the hunt, but also because of changes in camping and hunting methods that have made greater mobility possible.

It's been more than 20 years since the "Tote Gote" type of low-geared motor scooters or trail bikes were introduced into the wilderness, and the controversy continues over just how much harm they cause — and how or if we should limit their use. Before they arrived on the outdoor scene, the argument was over World War II-vintage Jeeps with their four-wheel-drive capability, and before that there was concern in some areas over horses and pack trains trampling nature underhoof.

Jeeps and horses are still around, of course, and still being used by outdoor folk, but the center of concern has shifted to a whole new breed of four-wheel-drive rigs that are smoother, safer, more comfortable and more reliable.

When it comes to equipment and creature comforts, the sky's the limit today. With a well-equipped camper or mobile home as a base camp, the hunter can drive to his hunting area the night before the season opens. After a night of rest, he wakes up refreshed to the sound of his digital clock-radio, cooks his breakfast on a butane stove and hits the woods ready for bear. Many campers now take along portable generators that bring heat, light — and noise — to remote camps, creating spots of civilized disturbance far into the night. When a late season storm hits, well-equipped hunters may be warm and dry no matter what the weather and decide to stay over anyway — a far cry from what was possible in the "good old days."

The new technology is nowhere more evident that in the new two- or three-wheelers from Japan. The high-tech, high-performance trail bikes are nimble, lightweight and versatile. This past hunting season, at a game check station northeast of Granite Falls, the Game Department checkers didn't bat an eye as a trio of nimrods arrived on three-wheeled dirt bikes with balloon tires. They roared out again, deerless, a few hours later.

More and better roads to get to your destination — and logging roads to allow navigation of the hunting area itself — have meant higher levels of traffic in formerly wild areas. Roads have been built into areas where they simply couldn't build them 30 or 40 years ago, many of them in prime wildlife habitat areas. Roads are easier to construct along the

wildlife habitat corridors formed by creek or river beds, and many a good road has wiped out a good area for wildlife.

Game Department studies have shown that wildlife use of an area is definitely affected by the miles of road — its "road density" — and the amount of traffic on those roads. A landmark study in the Blue Mountains of eastern Washington about 10 years ago measured deer and elk use of areas next to main roads, secondary roads and primitive roads, and found that elk were disturbed more than deer.

This study and others has led to the Department's increasing use of cooperative road management plans in conjunction with other agencies. According to wildlife habitat biologists, elk do not leave an area because of the physical presence of roads, but because of the continual harassment — the noise and commotion associated with motor vehicle traffic.

Closing roads in hunting areas to vehicular access eliminates this kind of disturbance, while cutting down on the legal harvest of elk, leaving more branch-antlered bulls for hunters in years to come. As for poaching, road closures definitely cramp the style of the shoot-and-scoot crowd, because most big game is poached along side roads or within easy reach of a road.

Because many non-hunted wildlife species, as well as fish populations, are sensitive to human disturbance, they also benefit from road closures. Road building and use subject fish to pollution or siltation of streams, something that careful planning and timing of road use can hold to a minimum.

Most roads closed in road management programs, such as the one in effect this past season on the Olympic Peninsula, are logging roads. They weren't intended primarily for use by people in search of outdoor recreation, although that has been a huge side effect. In the "good old days" it was pack horse or pack board if you wanted to have a wildlife experience. If we just use our heads a bit and plan road use in wilderness areas more carefully, maybe some measure of the "good old days" can return.

Proving once again that the "good old days" are all a matter of who's remembering what, where and when, there are some comments worth repeating from the 1933 *Hunting and Trapping Seasons and Game Bag Limits* pamphlet produced by the Game Department.

It was the first year for state-wide management under one agency, and that pamphlet is unique because it carried something never to appear in a season pamphlet again — an editorial. The comments were those of Sam G. Anderson,

Game Department photo

Fast cars and better roads have given impetus to hunting and fishing.

and they were re-printed from *Sports Afield* magazine:

> The soft ease of present day motorized, closed-car convenience has brought into the field a lot of meat hunters, pheasant canners and provisioners who are . . . ignorant of hunter ethics. These fellows are the trials of game wardens, a menace to our game life and a crying disgrace to the hunting fraternity.
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> In the real sportsman's code are certain fundamentals based upon common sense, common decency and common courtesy. The experienced gunner knows that the fact that lands are posted against hunting does not indicate that the landowner is a "hay-shaking" anti-social "scissor-bill" and that as an assertion of personal liberty, his signs should be shot down and his lands invaded until the intruder is indignantly chased off.

The editorial made a plea for courtesy and restraint by hunters, urging them to take care in leaving the farmer's land just as they found it, and to share their game with him as a way of saying thanks. Not a man to shun long sentences, Anderson had a long-winded bit of advice — and a warning — that are just as valid today as in 1933.

> (The unethical hunter) has got to be regulated, he must be taught manners and good behavior and brought under control, for if he is not, an indignant land-holding public will ban all free hunting as the only means of saving our wild life (sic) and protecting their property against impudent, swaggering, vandalic invasion and, as is usually the case in public offending, the innocent will suffer with the transgressor and all of us, without means to maintain private shooting grounds, will forfeit the priceless pleasure of sports afield with rod and gun.

While we have come a long way in hunter-landowner relations since those days of "vandalic invasion," sportsmen and game managers alike recognize that an uncaring few can still spoil hunting for the law-abiding majority.

Although the editorial focused on hunter ethics and landowner relations, the "ease of travel" it mentioned has magnified not only that problem, but the overall issue of people pressure on wildlife and wildlife habitat.

During winter, when animals have a tough enough time of it, snowmobile travel in the wrong place at the wrong time can add to their stress. In desert or dryland areas, off-road travel can damage soils and plants that are part of a fragile ecosystem. Even wildlife observers and photographers can "love" animals to death by making good habitat "uninhabitable" through disturbance or harassment. And litter is a problem for which wildlife enthusiasts and outdoor recreationists of all stripes must share the blame.

To the credit of many off-trail enthusiasts, they have banded together in clubs and follow strict codes of conduct. There are plenty of conscientious, conservation-minded individuals and groups who believe in having their fun in harmony with the environment.

Progress is often a debatable thing, but it's usually measured in terms of comfort and convenience — hard things to say "no" to. The logger isn't sorry that the chainsaw came along to make his job easier, and most hunters wouldn't be content to go back to the days of the flintlock rifle. Yet when it comes to preserving our wildlife, there must be limits. □